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Joint Inspection Unit

Records and archives management in the United Nations

Note by the Secretary-General

The Secretary-General has the honour to transmit to the members of the General Assembly his comments and those of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination on the report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled "Records and archives management in the United Nations" (see A/70/280).

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Summary

In its report entitled "Records and archives management in the United Nations" (see A/70/280), the Joint Inspection Unit seeks to assess whether current policies and procedures allow for the effective management of those information sources, both at headquarters locations and in the field. Directed at an audience beyond professional information management officers, the report is aimed at raising awareness, through its recommendations, among a broad spectrum of constituents of the importance of effective records and archives management.

The present note reflects the views of the Secretary-General and organizations of the United Nations system on the recommendations provided in the report. The views have been consolidated on the basis of input provided by member organizations of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination, which welcomed the report and supported some of its conclusions.

I. Introduction

1. In its report entitled "Records and archives management in the United Nations" (see A/70/280), the Joint Inspection Unit seeks to assess whether current policies and procedures allow for the effective management of those information sources, both at headquarters locations and in the field. Directed at an audience beyond professional information management officers, the report is aimed at raising awareness, through its recommendations, among a broad spectrum of constituents of the importance of effective records and archives management.

II. General comments

2. Organizations of the United Nations system welcomed the report. They recognized and appreciated the effort that went into its preparation and viewed it as a valuable contribution to strengthening the records and archives management process through improved governance, increased accountability and transparency and enhanced knowledge management, including better records preservation and institutional memory, which would lead to stronger, more efficient decision-making and risk management.

3. While organizations expressed satisfaction with the report overall, they noted that it would have been strengthened by additional elaboration on context and on cost-benefit considerations and risk mitigation measures put in place by organizations. Organizations cited one example in the report in which the Joint Inspection Unit concluded that a decision by one organization to end the funding of records management units "had negative consequences and generated risks that exceeded by far the proportion of costs 'spared' by such decisions" (see ibid., para. 85). However, the risk mitigation measures and the operational context in that case were not reflected in the report.

4. Organizations expressed agreement with the Joint Inspection Unit regarding the viability of the survey results used to derive some conclusions of the report, which incorporated "a potential bias that may have affected results" (see ibid., annex VIII). As an example, organizations noted that it was difficult to draw relevant conclusions by comparing the Secretariat and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. In addition, as noted in the report, a lack of baseline data further complicated comparisons and conclusions. While the interviews, surveys and questionnaires administered during the preparation of the report were directed towards offices that had implemented some components of a records management programme, they did not provide a picture of the gaps that still exist. For example, the Unit surveyed the Economic Commission for Africa, but not the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia or the Economic Commission for Asia and the Pacific.

5. Organizations also noted that a further limitation of the methodology and scope of the report was its focus on current institutional arrangements and management. As acknowledged in the report, digital records were not addressed, even though they make up "98 per cent of the total" number of records (see ibid., para. 16).

6. In addition, organizations noted that the report would have benefited from the highlighting of good practices, especially in the area of internal control mechanisms in decentralized operational contexts. Organizations agreed with the suggestion set out in the report calling for such measures (see ibid., para. 118) and also that specific examples of organizations having implemented those measures would have made the recommendations more concrete and constructive.

7. The suggestion that records and archive managers be recruited at the Director level rather than at the P-5 level in all cases (see ibid., para. 86) drew comments, with organizations noting that, in the context of a good governance structure, position grade must be tied to accountability and the responsibilities of the role.

8. Such aspects of the report aside, organizations agreed that the recommendations, which were wide in scope, as well as complex and challenging, provided a road map for improvement in that core operational function and, if effectively implemented and monitored, would help to improve the current records management and archives practices across all the United Nations entities that participated in the evaluation process.

9. Organizations also generally agreed with the vision expressed in the report that the recommendations be addressed as joint projects, in line with the High-level Committee on Management Strategic Plan 2013-2016, with the voluntary merging of resources and efforts to tackle such challenges as digital preservation. That would be especially critical because, as pointed out in the report, resources for records and archives management functions were extremely limited.

10. However, some organizations noted that business requirements were driving the adoption of information systems that were compatible with records and archives management on a timescale that might not be compatible with the development of a common United Nations approach. They also stressed that the records and archives management process reflected just one essential element of a business solution intended to meet the broader needs of an organization as a whole and that, therefore, the records and archives management solutions adopted by any individual organization should also be viewed from a holistic perspective. That approach would ensure that the adopted solution was fully integrated within the broader information technology systems already in place, specifically enterprise resource planning, messaging and collaboration platforms. Such a broad perspective was considered essential to ensuring that records and archives management was mainstreamed in order to capture all aspects of documents, communications and records (e.g., e-mails, as noted by the Joint Inspection Unit). In such an approach, records and archives management would be mainstreamed into existing systems rather than considered a peripheral, even secondary, activity.

11. Lastly, organizations agreed with the Joint Inspection Unit that records and archives management was a critical component of a wider information management framework and that the commitment to information management practices must remain strong.

III. Specific comments on recommendations

Recommendation 1

The Secretary-General and each of the executive heads of the United Nations entities covered by this report should review their respective regulatory frameworks governing records and archives management and recast them into a comprehensive and unequivocal set of principles, practice-oriented procedures and rules to keep pace with changes in the record-keeping environment and technology, and cover the whole life cycle of recorded information. They should ensure strict compliance with those principles, procedures and rules for any materials identified as records of the organization or entity.

12. Organizations supported recommendation 1, which called for a review of the existing regulatory frameworks governing records and archive management and recasting them into principles, practice-oriented procedures and rules to keep pace with changes in the record-keeping environment and technology, especially with regard to the exponential increase in the volume and number of formats of digital records. They noted that the rapid increase in the number of electronic documents and the volume of data represented a serious cost concern and also presented the risk of unauthorized disclosure, if such digital records were left unmanaged.

13. The Secretariat noted that some peacekeeping locations, especially in conflict-prone field environments, already bore higher-than-average costs for the storage of electronic information, given that unmanaged information presented risks to the safety and security of personnel. In addition, the Secretariat agreed with the need to ensure the compliance of all offices with established principles, procedures and rules and, to that end, welcomed the suggestion that records and archives management units and oversight services collaborate to produce a common records and archives management risk management tool that could be used for audits and for other routine assessments (see ibid., para. 102). The Secretary-General agreed with the observations in the report that emphasized the importance of reviewing and updating policies and procedures to ensure that they were sufficiently practice-oriented, including regarding the management of e-mails as records. He noted that, in the absence of an Organization-wide record storage tool, e-mail was increasingly being used to exchange sensitive information and documentation, and while the current policy defined by the Archiving and Records Management Unit provided general guidance on electronic data, further clarification would be welcome as to how records and archives management policy was to be applied to e-mail.

Recommendation 2

The Secretary-General and each of the executive heads of the United Nations entities covered by this report, as well as their senior managers, should be accountable for ensuring that all departments, offices and other entities under their responsibility have developed and apply the basic components of records management programmes to all records for which they have managerial responsibility.

14. Organizations agreed with recommendation 2, which called for management accountability in applying the basic components of records management. They noted, however, that under certain conditions that might pose challenges. For

peacekeeping operations in particular, they noted that, while chiefs of staff held the formal responsibility for overseeing information management activities, as noted in paragraph 115 of the report, each mission had the flexibility to tailor the terms of reference of the chief of staff to meet the mandate determined by the Security Council. At the very least, it was necessary for all relevant stakeholders to understand that accountability regarding information management rested with the mission's chief of staff.

Recommendation 3

The Secretary-General and each of the executive heads of the United Nations entities covered by this report should ensure that appropriate time and resources are allocated to institutionalizing tailored records and archives management training programmes delivered by experienced records and archives management experts, both at headquarters and in the field, to (a) senior and middle-level managers; (b) records coordinators and other staff involved in records and archives management activities; and (c) staff at large.

15. Organizations generally supported recommendation 3 and recognized the need for adequate resources for the training of staff members on records and archives management processes and procedures. While organizations strive to ensure that training is available for all institutional policies and procedures, they also pointed out that the resources available to provide training, including expertise on records and archives management, were subject to the support of the legislative bodies.

Recommendation 4

The Secretary-General and each of the executive heads of the United Nations entities covered by this report should ensure that information systems that capture, create or manage e-records meet international standards for record-keeping and the preservation of digital records and archives.

16. Organizations agreed with the recommendation that relevant information systems meet international standards for record-keeping and the preservation of digital records and archives. Several organizations, however, noted that implementing such standards could have significant cost implications, especially for such field operations as peacekeeping. In those environments, it would continue to be a challenge to meet international records and archives management standards, which presume stable, network-connected and digitized business processes, while at the same time meeting requirements for transparency and ensuring that sensitive information remains secure and uncompromised.

Recommendation 5

The Secretary-General, in his capacity as a Chair of the Chief Executives Board for Coordination, should create an inter-organizational task force chaired by an experienced records and archives management expert, bringing together those entities most interested in developing a common approach to the preservation of long-term and/or permanent digital records (strategy, policy and infrastructure).

17. Organizations recognized the importance of preserving digital records, noting that such preservation touched upon an important area within the records and

archives management area. While some organizations indicated that they had sufficient capacity and resources to implement a robust and sustainable digital approach on their own, there was overall support for the suggestion set out in the recommendation that a common approach across interested agencies, through the establishment of a task force, would prove beneficial.

Recommendation 6

The General Assembly and the governing bodies of the United Nations entities covered by this report should request the Secretary-General and the respective executive heads to present a corporate or joint project proposal to enhance records and archives management in a consistent way within their respective entities.

18. Noting that it was directed at governing bodies, organizations supported recommendation 6 regarding corporate or joint project proposals to enhance records and archives management.